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Pritchard, R. (1981). “Mr. Nearside and Mrs. Farsight Discuss Primary French.”. *The Northern Teacher*, 13(4), 24-25.

[Link to publication record in Ulster University Research Portal](#)

Published in:
The Northern Teacher

Publication Status:
Published (in print/issue): 01/01/1981

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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Mr. Nearside and Mrs. Farsight Discuss Primary French

A transcript of a conversation between two primary school principals

Rosalind M. O. Pritchard

that some children developed a sense of failure in the first year of learning French and that those who succeeded tended to have parents in high-status occupations. I suppose the most damning thing of all was that pupils learning French from the age of eight did not seem to do any better in the subject at the age of sixteen than those who began to learn French at eleven. However, I still think that there are important advantages in teaching primary French.

Mr. Nearside. Like what, for example? I certainly see none and apparently Clare Burstall did not see many either. What seems so wasteful and pointless to me is that most of the children who have done two or three years of French at primary school are treated as absolute beginners when they go to secondary school because the schools make no provision for the pupils' different levels of achievement.

Mrs. Farsight. You have a point there. It certainly does seem a shame to put the children back to the beginning of the course again but despite what you say I think that having made an early start on French might well be of help to some of the children later on. A researcher called Carroll in the United States tested about 3,000 college students specialising in languages and found that those who started their foreign language in the elementary school did strikingly better than those who only started in secondary school. He thought this was because the early start allowed the "good" students to spend more time on language learning and the longer they studied, the more proficient they became.

Mr. Nearside. That may be so but even if it is true, it is not much help to young children in the primary school. University is simply an unreal prospect to them. It is the here-and-now that they care about, not some far-distant future, and I think that primary French may have a negative effect upon the quality of the child's life in primary school, by disrupting the "integrated day", for example.

Mrs. Farsight. To a certain extent, I agree with you. It can reduce the flexibility of the school day if French is taught by a specialist teacher. That is why, in our school, the class teachers teach French to their own classes. We find that their overall teaching competence and their rapport with the children is really more important than the level of their linguistic proficiency. Actually, I think Clare Burstall came to the same conclusion in her book.

Mr. Nearside. That sounds reassuring I suppose, but I remain dubious about primary French. One reason is that, in my view, foreign language teaching is just not in keeping with the "ethos" of a modern primary classroom. Normally, we encourage discovery learning and pupil-centred work but it is extremely difficult to respect these principles in the early stages of language learning. There is no way that the pupils can "discover" the foreign language for themselves. On the contrary, they have to listen to the teacher, repeat structures and learn by heart. Surely the sudden switch from a relatively free approach to an apparently authoritarian teaching style could be bewildering for small children?

Mr. Nearside. I am surprised to hear that you teach French in your school from P4 on. I thought that this had been almost completely discredited by Clare Burstall in her book "Primary French in the Balance" and that she took up a firm position against a possible expansion of French teaching in primary schools.

Mrs. Farsight. I must admit that she certainly uncovered a lot of negative evidence about French teaching in the primary school. She found, for instance,

Mrs. Farsight. Perhaps. But on the other hand it is precisely because of certain qualities which small children possess that we think it especially worthwhile to begin language work with them. They are more spontaneous and enthusiastic than older children, less inhibited and not so hampered by fixed mother-tongue habits. Often they have a gift for mimicry. In fact a neurologist called Penfield has even suggested that the young child's brain is uniquely well adapted to language learning and that there is an optimum age for this task. After about ten years he believes that the physiology of the brain changes with the result that from puberty onwards, language learning is less successful than in very young children.

Mr. Nearside. Not everybody accepts Penfield's theories. So far as I can make out, they are only based on inferences and not on real experimental evidence. Anyhow, people like Thorndike and Asher have shown pretty conclusively that younger students learn languages more slowly than the older students, even when the "older" students are actually grown-up.

Mrs. Farsight. Really? Why should that be so?

Mr. Nearside. Well, I think it is because one of the most effective and quickest ways to teach a language is by grammatical analysis, however, young children are not able to benefit greatly from this type of teaching. Their conceptual ability takes time to develop, so perhaps it is not surprising that adults can beat them at language learning. Also the attention and memory spans of adults are longer and, naturally, that too enhances their performance. Tell me, have you by any chance read the work of Dodson on the young language learner?

Mrs. Farsight. I know that he is associated with the so-called "Bilingual Method" but I was not aware that he had written on primary education.

Mr. Nearside. Indeed he has. He found in his experiments that the average eight-year-old child must make approximately fifteen responses before he can say a foreign language sentence of five or six words fluently and accurately, while a twelve-year-old only needs eight contacts with the sentence in order to be able to repeat it. Also he discovered that primary children find it more difficult than secondary children to solve problems involved in the acquisition and retention of sentence meaning. All of which makes me ask: "Why bother the children at such an early age with an activity which they could perform more effectively at a later age"? The time spent on French could possibly even make primary school children do worse in their other subjects.

Mrs. Farsight. That is certainly not true. Clare Burstall produces massive evidence to show that the study of French in the primary school has no detrimental effect on children's performance in other subjects and she also shows that only very few teachers in her study — about 14%, I think — considered it "a waste of time" to teach French to less able pupils. As a matter of fact, 78% of her sample of teachers thought that no child should be deprived of the opportunity to learn French.

Mr. Nearside. Is that so? Well, despite all that you say, I can still see very little justification for teaching French at

primary level, especially as you cannot even claim that it makes the children do better in French at a secondary school.

Mrs. Farsight. You completely miss the point, Mr. Nearside. It is not attainment that is important for the child's human development. It is attitude. We find that the early start at French is associated with a lasting influence on the pupils' attitudes towards speaking French and that those who are successful in their efforts to learn French retain a more favourable attitude towards speaking the language than do the pupils who begin French at eleven. We also find that they know more about the French way of life and are more interested in it. The whole business of developing positive attitudes towards other nations and cultures is particularly important in a little island like ours on the periphery of Europe. Our situation tends to make us insular, whereas modern commerce favours the internationally-minded. Surely you must agree? The evidence shows that the time to build up favourable attitudes is when the children are young. Two researchers called Lambert and Klineberg found that affectionate and outgoing attitudes towards foreign people reach a peak at the age of ten and become progressively less favourable thereafter. Surely we must take advantage of this "open-minded" period? *You* can do whatever you think right in your school but for my part I am convinced that primary French helps to educate hearts as well as minds and I have every intention of continuing to teach it in *my* school, no matter what you may say.

Mr. Nearside and Mrs. Farsight have read the following works:

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